

“Truth that Frees”

Introduction: A few weeks ago I introduced you to the word “truthiness,” a word coined by comedian Stephen Colbert that was chosen by the folks at Merriam-Webster in 2006 as the Word of the Year. Colbert came up with this word as a way to define how politicians, more often than not, seem to bend the truth to suit their purposes. But truth has not only taken a hit in the realm of politics, on the street many are suspicious that there can be any such thing as truth. It is believed that something can be true for me but not for you, such as Rama looks good in black but I don’t, or coffee wakes me up but it upsets your stomach, or classical music moves my soul but it puts you to sleep, but, it is stated, there is no real ultimate truth that can be known, something that is true for all of us, when it comes to the ultimate issues of life.

Is that really the case? Is that really true? It seems to me that the law of gravity is as true for you as it is for me, that blowing through a red light is equally dangerous for both of us, and that God either exists for both you and me, or he doesn’t! The problem many have with truth, I think, is that if something is true, there are implications; truth can put boundaries around us that we don’t always like, boundaries we believe are restrictive. But in our text for this morning, as we go on to gaze upon the beauty that Jesus has laid out for us by John, Jesus not only clearly holds that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, but that this truth actually frees us rather than restricts us. As he declares:

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

As we explore this statement today, remember that Jesus is still at the feast of Tabernacles, where he has declared himself to be the light of the world, that whoever followed him would have the light of life. Well, he now unveils a bit of what it means to follow him, which is abiding in his word.

I. Fickle vs. Genuine Faith

A. To explain this, he begins by turning his attention to those Jews in the crowd who John tells us, “had believed him.” As we read the rest of the chapter, this is a curious statement because these folks turn out to be those who don’t understand their sinfulness, begin looking for a way to kill Jesus, and who Jesus would say have the devil as their father (v. 44)! Talk about politically incorrect! But Jesus was zeroing in on a critical distinction. These folks had seen the signs that Jesus had been performing, and they had listened to his words, but they really hadn’t, when push came to shove, internalized this word and sought to live by it. Their faith, it seems, was fickle, not genuine.. What separates genuine faith from fickle faith is abiding in the word of Jesus.

B. “Abide” is a great word, one that the NRSV translates as “continue in,” the NIV has as “hold to,” and The Message reads “stick with this.” Together these capture the richness and depth of what Jesus is saying.

Illustration: Those of you who have been involved in VBS know that each of the five nights has a tag line. This summer, it was God has the power to provide, to comfort, to heal, to forgive, and to love us forever. When the kids heard that phrase at various points of the evening, they were to stop what they were doing, grab their wrist, and shout out “hold on!” It was to serve as a reminder that in the midst of the trials and tribulations and the challenges of life, to hold on to God.

Those who are truly genuine in their faith, Jesus is saying, will “hold on,” they will persevere as they abide in and continue in the truth of the teaching of Jesus.

II. Freedom from Slavery

A. We want to abide in this word of Jesus not only to help us thru the difficult challenges of life, but also because, as Jesus goes on to say, it is the truth that will set us free. This is where his listeners began to get tripped up and ticked off. “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone,” they declare. “What’s all this about being free?” It’s certainly hard to believe that they had forgotten the slavery their ancestors had experienced in Egypt, or any of the other nations that had ruled over the Israelites throughout the following generations. It is more likely that they are simply declaring that being linked to Abraham by physical descent gives them a superior status. Their father, their name, they believed, gave them their identity and standing in God’s sight. The Jews certainly had an incredible heritage. Chosen by God and rescued by God, that had been called by God to be a light to the nations. But this great obligation and responsibility turned into feelings of privilege and protection.

Illustration: It would be something like saying “I’m a Cabot, or a Lodge, or a Burnham, or a Storey, or a Ziegenhals (though that last one doesn’t rally carry too much weight!). Such identity can give us standing in our community. Spiritually we can take the same approach. “I come from a long line of Lutheran ministers,” or “my family has always been Presbyterian,” or “my ancestors have been coming to this church for generations,” or even, “my dad is the pastor of this church.” All of those point to a great heritage, but not necessarily to a personal, and growing relationship with God. For that, abiding in the word made flesh – Jesus – and continuing in his word, is necessary.

B. Here is might be helpful to recognize that the truth is both propositional and personal. In is propositional in that it consists in what Jesus has taught, and it is personal in that Jesus himself is the actual Word of God. John begins to tease this out in the opening verses of his gospel when he writes: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” A few verses later John reveals that this Word became flesh and walked among us in the person of Jesus (1:1, 14). God, in other words, spoke himself into our presence; he chose to communicate his truth to us through this very person of Jesus.

C. It is to this person that even God’s chosen people needed to come. They needed to come to the one, the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus, to whom all of their sacrifices had been pointing, in order to enter into life with God. And to continue in this life, they needed, as we all do, to abide in this word. It is this word that gives life meaning and purpose and value and direction. It is this word that helps us to break free from the slavery, the addiction, really, that sin can become. It is this word that guides us, not into some kind of restrictive burden, but which actually frees from those things that do not satisfy, from the possessions and power and prestige that we falsely believe give us identity and purpose. It is this word that guides us instead to find our true identity in Christ, who then guides us to live the life that is truly life, “growing up,” and the NT writers describe it, in our salvation (cf. 1 Peter 2:2-3)..

To take us back for just a minute to our “triangle of transformation” (James Bryan Smith), how does God change lives? How does God rescue us from the slavery of sin? He does so through the power of his Spirit, as we live within and receive encouragement from the community of God’s people, engage in the spiritual disciplines or habits, and abide in the narratives about and teaching of Jesus.

Illustration: Enroute to Chicago last Sunday I fell into conversation with the young woman sitting next to me on the airplane. After I probed a bit about who she was and where she was going, she asked what I did and I told her I was a pastor. She then asked where I was going and I said to an ongoing time with other pastors and leaders around the topic of spiritual formation. She asked if there were other religions involved or was this just a Christian thing. I answered that all of us were Christians, and we have the idea that if we could just live a little more like Jesus, and help others to do the same, that our world would be a much better place. After a pause she said, “That sounds good!”

Jesus, you see, does not give us his teaching, his foundation for living, to restrict our lives or put unreasonable boundaries upon us, or make us or others miserable. He gives us his teaching to help us live wonderfully free from the slavery of sin and wonderfully free to care for others. He wants to lead us into the glorious light of life within the kingdom of God. Such life begins at the cross, to which we now turn.